Academic Hunger (0236)

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What would you think if a colleague said "I didn't have time for lunch today"? Not very much, probably. Maybe they were particularly busy, or some emergency cropped up that they had to deal with. Perhaps they were marking to a deadline, or teaching back-to-back over the lunch hour. Maybe they habitually moan. Lots of possible, ad-hoc reasons. But what if 82 colleagues said it to you?

> *I felt I could not afford a lunch break and ate my sandwiches at my keyboard. [February 289]*
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> *No lunch, and very little slacking all day. [February 258]*
>
> *I feel good about preparing the meal for my wife and sons, even though it takes much more time than I generally allocate for lunch (which approximates zero) [February 14]*

This is one of the unexpected insights we gained from reading a year-long series of academic diaries, written the 15th of every month between September 2010 and August 2011 for the Sharing Practice project (www.sharingpractice.ac.uk). 389 academics registered with the project, although not all 389 participated from the start, and not all wrote every month. In total, the corpus comprises 1,454 diary entries from the 249 registrants who submitted at least one entry. Of those, 864 (in some form) mention food.

The project was not directly seeking information about food. Rather, the diarists offered it as something important happening in their daily lives, at least as something important enough to write down. We solicited the diaries in order "… to discover what is significant in academics' lives — not what someone else thinks should be significant. We want you to tell us what you really do. We're interested in detail and nuance, in the gaps between what is supposed to happen and what does happen, between staff and student, between institution and individual." One of the pieces of "detail and nuance" we found was how the diarists felt about cooking and eating.

Local Context

Diarists' don't only report missed meals, they also include positive reports of meals that "work" for them in the academic setting, that report positive interaction, unexpected exchange of useful information, and which support collegiality. These often include a tone of surprise:

> *So, an opportunity to catch up with a couple of other colleagues for half an hour … I feel this is really important... I'll count it as that lunch break I didn't have! [March 134]*

> *…then dinner …The talk is partly of comparative university politics, partly of subject politics, partly of France and partly of mathematics. Very enjoyable. [April 34]*

> *Prior to that I very much enjoyed a coffee with a colleague and our new member of departmental staff. We took the opportunity to fill in our new colleague about some of the history of our largest Department course [October 78]*

Invisible Foodscapes

A *foodscape* is "our food environments and … the potential impact on food choice and food behaviour" (Mikkelsen, 2011), as our diarists straightforwardly report in respect of their local contexts. Kaori O'Connor extends the notion to "invisible foodscapes" (O'Connor, 2013) consumption practices that are defined by "cultural reason in our food habits" (Sahlins, 1976) and not obviously present in the environment. By seeking these invisible foodscapes we extended our consideration of food in academic life.

Foodscapes may be rendered invisible on multiple levels: they can be culturally invisible, meaning that people do not recognize consumption *as* food. Diarists rarely conceived of their rushed lunches as meals in the larger sense. When describing the sandwiches, salads, or leftover dishes consumed at their desks, fillings are un-named or un-noticed, they eat simply "sandwich" or "salad". In a stark contrast, diarists provided more, and at times vivid, context about the preparation and consumption of food outside of work and at home.

> *Fixed a batch of pork fajitas for lunch. Pork chops rubbed with chili powder, then grilled. Sautéed onions and peppers, then sliced and heated the pork in a skillet with salsa, lime juice, and Worcestershire sauce. Threw it all together with some fresh diced tomatoes. Yummy. ... January 116]*

And descriptions of food-anchored social interactions with colleagues were similarly detailed. Yet, such events are rarely sanctioned by departments; another way foodscapes become invisible is through (a lack of) administration or formal regulation.

> *… Where everybody's sort of, not **expected**, but say, you know, there's doughnuts Friday at 11 o'clock. And most people will say, 'it's interesting because I get quite a lot of work done in that 11 to 11:30'.*

Mary Douglas writes "The meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image." (Douglas, 1972).

Following Douglas, in this paper we suggest that the "meals" the diarists report stand in relation not only to their own institutional schedules and personal daily sequences (whether they've children; whether they've academic spouses) but that they also stand in relation to the idea(l) of other academic meals – the communal eating of Ancient University Colleges and the collegial opportunities afforded by dining halls, canteens and common rooms. Their foodscapes encompass not only local opportunities, but, invisibly, a wider cultural construction. In this, the missing of a meal means more than missing nutrition; its absence connotes the distance between an actual academic life and a desired one. Between:

… brushing off the crumbs and wiping away the foodstains of ten weeks' worth of lunches-sat-at-the-computer and *…the internal invites me to have lunch in the college, so we repair to the hall … then for coffee in the Fellows Common Room where I am introduced to the present Master … [266]*

References

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